

# WHO WAS WHO IN HORNSEY

No. 9 in our series

## John Samuel Alder (1847-1919)

by KEN GAY

Some men are destined to leave a permanent mark on their communities yet their names remain little known. Such a one seems to be J.S. Alder, an architect whose buildings gave character to many local areas, including Hornsey and Wood Green. One particular church he designed stands high and commanding with its tall tower and spire and can be seen from distant places. Yet how many Muswell Hill people, if asked, could give the name of the architect of St. James's, the church which gives so much character to the district?

John Samuel Alder<sup>1</sup> was born the eldest son of a Gloucestershire man in Birmingham on 13th January 1847. The family moved to West Malvern, Worcestershire where Alder became clerk of works in his father's building firm. In 1868 he was articled to a local architect. In 1872, when he was 25 years old, he joined a London firm which specialised in ecclesiastical work where he was employed on new churches, restoration work and some domestic buildings. He studied with the Architectural Association and visited France and Italy where he sketched prolifically.

In 1884 Alder married and was to have two sons and a daughter. In 1887 he was in practice in Palmerston Buildings in Old Broad Street EC. In 1898 he formed a partnership with John Turrill, based at Arundel Street, Strand. In 1916 he became a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Alder had come to live at Muswell Hill by 1888, residing at a small semi-detached house (which still exists) called Hillside<sup>2</sup> in Muswell Road, off Colney Hatch Lane. Situated in an area under the control of Clerkenwell ('Clerkenwell Detached') this road was one of a few laid out here, in the 1880s though Muswell Hill itself was to remain predominated by detached villas in small estates until 1896. Alder remained in Muswell Hill (but at other addresses) and became sidesman at one church he designed, St Andrew's in nearby Alexandra Park Road. He died on 28th October 1919 (of peritonitis) in his 72nd year.<sup>3</sup>

Alder was a prolific church architect, finding his commissions in the expanding suburbs of London, which absorbed the villages on its outskirts and created new estates on what were once extensive green fields. For the Diocese of London he built ten churches, 25 church halls and nine vicarages.<sup>4</sup> Alder's 1916 application form for his RIBA fellowship details those he had built in his 69 years till then.<sup>5</sup>

In Hornsey, Alder was the architect of St. James's, Muswell Hill; St. Andrew's and St. Saviour's both in Alexandra Park Road, and St. George's in Priory



*Designed by Alder and consecrated in 1903, this Alexandra Park Road church was almost completely destroyed by bombing in the Second World War.*



*St Andrew's Today, rebuilt and reopened in 1957. The west wall was moved back from the road 24 feet.*

Road. He also built St. Cuthbert's, Wolves Lane, Wood Green; St. Peter's in South Tottenham and St Benet Fink, Tottenham; Holy Trinity, Winchmore Hill, and St Barnabas, Woodside Park. Other churches he listed were in Shepherds Bush, Harrow, Cricklewood, Ashford, Twickenham, Harlesden, Neasden. He built outside London at Worcester and Broadstairs.

The parish halls he built were equally numerous and included all Hallows, Tottenham; St Augustine's, Highgate, where he was a Churchwarden<sup>6</sup>; Holy Trinity, Stroud Green; St Michael, Wood Green; St Mary's, Bowes Park; as well as four halls in Edmonton and others at Mill Hill, Potters Bar, Walham Green, Islington, Holloway, Cricklewood, Palmers Green, Twickenham, Temple Fortune and Marylebone.

He built vicarages at Noel Park, Wood Green and St Augustine's, Highgate, and also for St Andrew's, Alexandra Park Road. Six houses at Muswell Hill were designed by Alder but he did not give their location on his RIBA form.

The building of St James's at Muswell Hill followed from the formation of a special church council to consider what steps should be taken to provide for the growing needs of the parish.<sup>7</sup> They called in Alder who reported that the existing church was in a bad state of repair. His report was confirmed by another architect and the council decided to build an entirely new church to accommodate 900 to 1,000 people. A limited architectural competition led to the acceptance of the plans of J.S. Alder. It was understood that this work was not to exceed £13,000 in cost. The first portion of the new church was concentrated on May 25th 1902 by the Bishop of London.<sup>8</sup>

The church was designed in Perpendicular style and built in Bath stone (for dressings) and Ancaster stone (for wall facings, inside and out). For lack of funds the tower was at first only built up to the level of the nave roof. It was finally completed with a spire in 1910 to stand 179 ft. high on a site 337 ft. above sea level.

The foundation stone of the new church of St Andrew in Alexandra Park Road was laid by the Bishop of London in January 1903.<sup>9</sup> The cost of this church was put at £7,000. It was built at the centre of a rapidly expanding district in what had been Clerkenwell Detached. Proposals for the formation of a new Muswell Hill church and district in Clerkenwell Detached were first made in 1896, and a temporary church opened before the new one was built.<sup>10</sup> St Saviour's, further east along Alexandra Park Road and in Wood Green district, was opened in 1904, again built to Alder's designs.

Sadly Alder's local churches were to be damaged in the Second World War. St George's, built in 1907 in Priory Road, on the corner of Park Avenue south was bombed in 1940 and demolished in 1956, and its site used for a new fire station.

St James's was gutted by a fire bomb in 1941 but was well restored in 1952 and continues as a thriving church. St Andrew's was burnt out by incendiary bombs in February 1944 with only the walls left standing.<sup>11</sup> Happily it was restored in the late 1950s, although in modified smaller form, and rededicated 13th November 1957.

St Saviour's escaped serious damage in the war but is now under threat. This fine, red-brick Gothic church by Alder has some internal cracks. Plans have been made, (deferred for four years in 1989) to demolish the building and the adjoining 1926 church hall and to redevelop the site, which is quite extensive and borders Alexandra Park. The plans are for a small housing estate and a new, smaller St Saviour's. Many local residents will be very sad to lose this distinctive building and wonder if it could not be saved.

Little personal information is available about Alder, despite research by Mrs. Anne Carstairs, one of his grand-daughters. (Another has become an architect). He seems to have been a busy professional man, but further information about him would be welcome. His legacy though stands about us.

#### References

1. Information in the next two paragraphs from the architect's grand-daughter, Mrs Anne Carstairs
2. *Kelly's Directory 1890*
3. *The History of St Andrew's Church 1899-1950* by H.E. Boisseau
4. *Boisseau*
5. RIBA folder on J.S. Alder
6. *St Augustine of Canterbury Highgate. A short history of the church.* by Andrew Sanders, 1975, p.11
7. *Hornsey Journal* 10th June 1899
8. *Hornsey Journal* 5th July 1902
9. *Hornsey Journal* 17th January 1903
10. *Hornsey Journal* 7th October 1897
11. *Boisseau*

## LETTERS

### "THE MUSWELL HILL OUTRAGE" (Bulletin 31)

*From the Metropolitan Police Museum, Room 1334, New Scotland Yard ,  
Broadway, London SW1H 0BG*

I enclose the review copy of 'Victorian Values', which Police sergeant Bernard Brown kindly sent me for perusal. Of particular interest is the article on the Muswell Hill Outrage. It makes fascinating reading, though I would point out the mistake on page 32 — the 'Peeler' uniform of the swallow-tail coat and stove-pipe hat was withdrawn in 1864-5, so this particular chap must have been standing on his hat for twenty-five years!

Best wishes,

Richard Sharp